



Doggone

GOOD MANNERS

A well-mannered retriever makes waterfowling fun and safe

Waterfowl hunting, especially from a blind, is a wonderful pursuit. It's also fraught with potential dangers. Water, ice, darkness, guns, mud, dogs, decoys, boats and a compact environment create a mix of potential pitfalls. You can't control everything, but you can control your dog.



Dave Wilson of Newton Grove has been training retrievers for over 20 years. His kennel at Gold Leaf Retrievers stays full (about 24 dogs) year-round and has since he went full time back in 2003. Since then he's trained over 40 dogs to Master Hunter titles in American Kennel Club hunt tests, including 14 Master National passes.

Wilson, 44, got into retriever training the old-fashioned way.

"Like everybody else, I was a hunter and wanted a dog to pick up my birds," he said. "Later, I was messing around on the Internet and discovered AKC hunt tests. That really got me interested."

Wilson bought videos and books and "associated myself with the right people," including trainers Jim Elam of Warrenton and Alan Pleasant of Angier.

Obedience

Wilson cites several common failures in "shoot-and-splash" dogs — breaking, failing to cast, hard mouth, conditioning — but disobedience ranks at the top of his list.

"In my experience with dogs, I believe obedience is number one without a doubt," he said after a hot July training session. "You're not teaching a dog to retrieve, you're teaching a dog to obey. What I look for is talent. I can put the obedience in him. Obedience is the foundation."

Wilson starts the "informal" training at 3 to 4 months of age. "I'm just getting them the idea of what commands mean," he said. "They're here to learn and work for you."

"Sit," "here" and "heel" are the first commands, and all are taught physically using a lead and a choke collar (not a pinch collar). "Sit" trumps all other commands.

"'Sit' means sit and STAY until you're told to do something different," said Wilson. "Make sure he fully understands sit. It's the most important thing they can learn. It means sit and be still ... lining up for a retrieve, sitting still and being able to see the birds. "Sit" means control. Once you establish sit, you establish control."

"Here" follows "sit." For Wilson, "here" means "get close to me." "Heel" comes after "here." A stationary dog can be steered to



an extent using “here” and “heel” along with the handler’s or gunner’s body positioning and lean.

There are five “cardinal commands” in the retriever trainer’s lexicon: sit, here, heel, fetch and back. The greatest of these is sit.

Breaking

Whether it’s a dove field or duck swamp, dogs “breaking”—leaving without permission—is a common sight. It often comes upon seeing game or on the report of the gun. Many hunters ignore it because all they want is the dog to retrieve their bird, but breaking can be more than an over-eager retrieve.

“I’ve seen dogs steal doves from a dove pile. I’ve seen dogs retrieve another party’s ducks,” said Wilson. “Breaking ruins your hunt and is unsafe. It’s as much a safety issue as it is an etiquette issue.”

Again, “sit” is the foundation. If he’s sitting, he’s not breaking. Wilson likes to use a downed duck as a teaching opportunity to emphasize control.

“When a duck hits the water, I hesitate two or three seconds before sending him,” said Wilson. “It’s a perfect opportunity to teach control.”

The command “mark” is used a lot during field training, but is phased out. During training Wilson will say “mark” and click the safety on his shotgun. Eventually

the safety click means “mark” but Wilson also reinforces “sit” while birds are in play.

Failure to cast

Ever been on a duck hunt where the hunter had to throw rocks or shotgun shells to

Wilson explained that a blind retrieve is an extension of obedience. A marked retrieve is natural ability. He also said failure to cast is simply a lack of training or a lack of repetition during training. Spare the whistle and spoil the dog.



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direct a dog on retrieve? Ever watched a dog cast only as far as one could throw a tennis ball in the yard? A retriever is not much good when it can’t or won’t go to where the bird is. Some hunters keep their dogs in the blind with limited visibility, while in other scenarios the dog can see the action from the get go. Either way, the dog may need some direction to secure the bird.

“Some people run every retrieve as a blind [retrieve],” said Wilson. “I think the dog is bred to mark . . . they have a prey drive. It helps their confidence.”

Hard mouth

You can’t eat a bird if the dog renders it unpalatable during the retrieve. Wilson believes these hard-mouthed dogs are born that way. He quoted noted Tar Heel trainer Woody Thurman: “Pick the parents, don’t pick the puppy.”

During the force-fetch portion of training, pups are trained in how to hold the bumper. “If he’s rough on the bumper, we’ll cuff him under the chin and repeat ‘hold’ in a dominant voice,” said Wilson. “Once he’s holding it correctly, we stroke him from head to tail



and say 'hold' in a comforting voice." Wilson thinks that a dog mouths a bird because he likes how it tastes or he's playing with it. Either way, it's unacceptable.

In the field, Wilson will have the dog sit, take the bird and go through the "hold" process. If the dog is messing with the bird on a longer retrieve, whistling "sit" often takes the dog's mind off the bird while awaiting another command.

Conditioning

Your "six pack" may have turned into a case years ago, but there's no reason your dog should be fat. Conditioning is good for a dog's mental well being as well as physical fitness.

"There's no excuse for your dog not being in shape," Wilson said.

"A retriever marks with his eyes and locates with his nose. A dog panting heavily can't smell through his nose as well."

A panting dog can't retrieve as well either at the risk of ingesting water or feathers. Off-season exercise for retrievers is easier than pointing breeds or hounds, which may be out of sight before you pocket the leash. Informal retrieving sessions in the yard or more strenuous sessions in a park or field are not hard to do.

For neighborhood work, a tennis ball slingshot is available for about \$20, and for fieldwork, products like the Retrieve-R-Trainer® (starting at about \$100) utilize .22 blanks to launch a retrieving dummy up to 100 yards. This not only gives the dog a realistic hunting distance, it also helps acclimate the pup to gunfire. Don't let the ".22" part fool you; eye and ear protection

Whether your dog is a Super Retriever Series competitor or a local duck swamp denizen, it should know the five basic obedience commands: sit, here, heel, fetch and back. It all starts with sit, and it's more than just convenience. An obedient dog is a safe dog, not only for his sake, but for other hunters' and dogs'.

are musts with these devices. A good pair of leather gloves will help with the recoil as well.

What's next

Are you happy with your dog? For some, a dog that will pick up a few birds a year and bring them back in (mostly) one piece is all they want. To train for the basics and beyond, there is plenty of help available from books and video products, including a series produced by Mid Carolina Media based in Raleigh. They've taken the late Richard Wolters' classic training methods and produced training videos like "Top Dog" and "Water Dog" for the home trainer.

Should you go the professional route, figure on a minimum of \$600 a month and three months of training.

"I feel like all dogs can benefit from obedience training, force fetch training and [electronic] collar conditioning," said Wilson. "As far as trainers are concerned, go with someone you trust and do your homework."

Owning a competent retriever — a true partner in the field — should rank high on the list of any waterfowler. And while country-mile casts and multiple blind retrieves can make your hunting heart sing, remember it all starts with the basics. Start with "sit" and go from there. ♦

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